

Gulf duty for Groves extended

By Don Yaeger

Staff writer

Sandra Bechtold has not forgotten the chill that ran down her spine Sunday afternoon when she heard a Navy ship had been attacked in the Persian Gulf.

Her husband, Chief Petty Officer Stephen Bechtold, was there, aboard the guided-missile frigate USS Steven W. Groves.

"Immediately I started worrying," Mrs. Bechtold said yesterday. Then she heard the damaged ship was not the Groves. It was the USS Stark — the Groves' sister ship — which had been hit by two Iraqi missiles.

Her fear turned to grief for the widows of the Stark crew members.

But yesterday, the chill returned.

The Navy has announced that the Groves, which left the Mayport Naval Station on Feb. 5 alongside the Stark, will be kept in the troubled waters of the Persian Gulf for an additional two months. The Groves deployment was extended to compensate for the loss of the Stark, the Pentagon said.

The last homecoming of the 20-year veteran Bechtold, who will retire after this tour, has now been delayed until August.

"We're worried. Everyone is worried," Mrs. Bechtold said. "But I believe in the ship they are on. I believe everyone is competent and that they are safe. I feel comfortable with that."

Mrs. Bechtold said that within hours of the attack on the Stark,

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which left 37 sailors dead, Navy officers had contacted her to let her know the Groves was not involved in the incident and her husband was safe.

Then she went to work, calling the other families of Groves sailors, informing them of the good — and bad — news.

"I want my husband home, naturally," Mrs. Bechtold said. "But I kind of figured they would do that [extend the Groves' tour] for as long as the Stark was to be over."

The Stark originally was scheduled to return in early August. The Groves was to begin its return next week, arriving in Mayport on June 15.

Mrs. Bechtold, her 15-year-old daughter and 12-year-old son now must wait with heightened anticipation as her husband remains a part of the Navy's Middle East Task Force.

"It bothers me a little bit, honestly," she said. "But it is my husband's job. I have to accept that. I believe in him. The children have been trying to offer me support while I'm helping other families. It is tough for all of us."

Mrs. Bechtold is the volunteer ombudsman for the Groves, serving as the conduit between the Navy and the crew's families while the ship is at sea.

This week, she helped Navy officials form a support group to ease the anxieties of the family members of Groves sailors.

"As early as yesterday, the entire [Groves] wives' group got together," said Eric Casas, deputy director of the Family Service Center at Mayport.

The wives met with base officials and the ship captain's wife, Carol Cornett, to discuss their anxiety about the ship remaining in the gulf, Casas said.

"We told them that what happened [to the Stark] was not an everyday occurrence," he said.

"Their normal reaction was anxiety. We reminded them that the Navy would take care of them."